

## Bad Village

Her father doesn't ask her consent, but promises his greatly-admired daughter to the old warrior anyway, despite her silent protest. Many years separate the girl from the man she is bound to marry, and secretly—her parents know nothing of it—she had promised herself already to a young warrior from the village.

All of that is the first act of this somehow familiar drama. What it clearly suggests is an ancient human conflict: love versus community, tradition, and family. This version belongs to Omaha lore.

The second act of the story is the marriage ceremony, a community event during which the bride sits beside the old man, her appointed husband, as if she has graciously consented to the match and to him. Her parents are greatly pleased because this is how things go with the people. Their daughter is, by long-standing tradition, her father's gift.

The third act complicates matters, changes entirely the direction of the story. All through the village, the people are in an uproar because, in the darkness, that beautiful young bride walked off, simply left everything behind before going to the old warrior's dwelling. Not only that, but the young warrior is also missing. The truth?—some are not surprised. The old warrior and his friends go on an angry search. The girl's mother falls into grief while her husband sits in profound, stupefied silence, shamed by his daughter's brazen rejection of tradition.

The fourth act begins quickly when a boy comes to the dwelling of the girl's parents. He's tired, wheezing from running. "Your daughter is found," he tells them. "Hurry, if you would see her alive!" He can barely get out the words. "The old man has stripped her of her clothes and is whipping her to death."

The camera doesn't move because the fourth act slows painfully. The father's eyes grow narrow. He doesn't get to his feet, makes no move to leave but looks instead at his three sons. "Go," he tells them, "see if there is any truth in this."

The look on his oldest son's face is unyielding. He says nothing, simply shakes his head. He will not go. The second son looks away and bows, their shame greater than their love for their sister.

But the third son, the youngest, takes his bow, pulls his quiver over his shoulder, says nothing, and leaves.

The very heart of the village is the setting of the final act, the climax. When the boy with the bow sees his sister suffering and screams at onlookers who've done nothing to stop the horror, he draws his bow and sends an arrow right through the old warrior's heart. When he does, both sides of the conflict go to battle right there in the heart of the village, a deadly battle, so that by the time the fighting ends and the two sides depart forever from each other, the village becomes home only to the dead.

That's the story, the legend, and it belongs to the Omaha people; but its elements belong to all of us. It's a love triangle and a tragedy, with a hero, a young man whose love for his sister triumphs over the darkness of tradition. It's a parable, as most of our most memorable stories are.

For the Omahas there is a denouement. By tradition, that story explains why the people left that village near Bow Creek forever, a place they called for generations "Bad Village."

For the rest of us, the story of Bad Village is as familiar Romeo and Juliet, a story we may well shudder to hear but somehow love to tell.